



**Committee on  
Homeland Security** Democrats  
**Bennie G. Thompson, Ranking Member**

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***Opening Statement of Ranking Member, Rep. Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)***  
**Center for American Progress, Lessons from Katrina: Critical Infrastructure,  
Preparedness and Homeland Security**

“Bringing together experts in a forum such as this is critical to our nation’s efforts to secure our homeland. We need this kind of discussion to ensure that our communities are prepared and ready to respond to catastrophe – whether in the form of a natural disaster or a terrorist attack. As the Ranking Member of the Homeland Security Committee and a Mississippian – I can tell you that the federal government was not prepared for Hurricane Katrina. A month later, despite some press conferences and back-patting, the government was not prepared for Hurricane Rita. With Rita, instead of mass flooding, we saw mass evacuation problems as the citizens of Houston, the nation’s fourth largest city, tried to escape harm’s way.

“As Jim Turner, my former colleague and predecessor on the Committee can attest, there were massive traffic jams from Houston to Dallas, many of them through the District he once represented in Congress. I’m certain when he speaks to you later today he can tell you about his on-the-ground observations of what happened in East Texas during Rita. When Wilma struck Florida, I continued to hear stories of communities suffering and critical infrastructure destroyed. Many watched the press conference as the Governor of Florida apologized for the failed response efforts.

“I personally know, from what I’ve seen and experienced the last few months that he was apologizing for things that FEMA should have been on top of. Three months and three hurricanes later, I have concluded that the federal government has been sadly oblivious to the painfully obvious. That is, more than 4 years after 9/11, our nation is still unprepared. Even with the several days notice that the hurricane gave us; our federal government still couldn’t pre-place assets or coordinate response and recovery among federal, state, and local agencies. Imagine what would happen if San Francisco or LA was hit by an earthquake, with only seconds notice or if terrorists struck anywhere within our borders again. My observation on post-911 intelligence gathering and sharing efforts does not give me comfort that we will have notice of such an attack. That, of course, is another topic for another conference.

“If our nation is to be prepared in the future, there are several things that the federal government must do quickly and correctly. First, it is about time that the federal government realizes that drafting a plan that gathers cobwebs on a bookshelf just doesn’t cut it. Neither does conducting exercises that doesn’t result in changed behavior or lessons learned. For example, the Department of Homeland Security had a National Response Plan. It prepared a national planning prepared earlier this year that laid out what would happen if a hurricane hit a major city in the Gulf. It even conducted the 2004 “Hurricane Pam” exercise that had 120 mile per hour winds hitting Southeast Louisiana and the New Orleans levees being overcome by storm surge. A national response plan, a scenario, and an exercise mean little if we don’t follow their recommended actions.

“Now, I’ve reviewed material about all three and am saddened that much of what happened in Louisiana and Mississippi was predicted – and still FEMA and the Department weren’t ready. Tom Ridge once called the Response Plan the government’s playbook to responding to disaster. We all know that a playbook is only as good as the players who are using it and the coach and captain who are leading the team. In this case, the coach seemed disengaged while the team captain – Michael Brown – missed what was going on in the stadium.

“The Department of Homeland Security must also learn to do a better job working with state, local and tribal governments to ensure that they understand their respective roles and responsibilities in a time of crisis. Let me be clear – the federal government should not be running the show. A federal official should not be rushing in to take over and give commands to state and local officials as if he or she knows the community better than a native. Federal officials should, however, be able to assist state and locals when they are overwhelmed; especially if they are underwater and without interoperable or even operable communications. Stories should not come back to Congress of FEMA or any other federal agency “holding” generators and resources from local first responders because some form wasn’t faxed to a bureaucrat in Washington.

“I know this is hard to believe, but I’ve heard first hand from folks back in Mississippi that things like this happened during Katrina. Then I heard it again from Texas first responders, mayors, and judges during Rita. The federal government must assist on a number of other fronts, including helping states, cities, and towns create evacuation plans. I’d like to see the government do its job and stop passing the buck.

“Let me turn from disaster response and preparedness to discuss critical infrastructure protection. Just as our disaster response efforts were lacking, critical infrastructure protection in the Gulf region was dismal. The protection of our critical infrastructure is critical to our way of life and to our economic security. Last Congress, several Members, including Jim Turner and myself raised concerns over what was being done to secure the nation’s critical infrastructure. We saw the Department’s National Asset Database list, which was supposed to catalogue our nation’s vulnerabilities. As my Republican colleague Ernie Istook said it best when he saw Oklahoma’s assets in the database -- the list is a ‘joke.’

“In California, check cashing sites and miniature golf courses made it on the list, while critical Internet assets in the heart of Silicon Valley did not. DHS couldn’t even put Disneyland in the right location.

In February, the Department released a draft National Infrastructure Protection Plan. Department officials testifying before my Committee last month indicated that the draft was inadequate and badly-written. I’ve asked for information as to who completed this draft, as I have reason to believe that contractors were paid to prepare this critical document for the Department. It concerns me that potentially thousands of taxpayer dollars were paid to a contractor who didn’t get the job done. Consequently, the Department had to re-draft the plan and only released a final draft for comment a few weeks ago. That version is months away from being finalized and it is still unknown as to when we will receive sector-specific plans.

“The Department has properly involved Federal, State, Local, and Tribal authorities, the private sector, unions, and privacy/civil liberties groups to ensure that the plan represent America’s interests.

It wouldn’t surprise me if this turns out to be another plan that gathers cobwebs until something happens. After Hurricane Katrina, DHS recognized, in a September 16<sup>th</sup> document, that a ‘number of the critical infrastructures within the [Gulf] region were shutdown, damaged, or destroyed as a result of Hurricane Katrina.’

“Here are a few infrastructures identified by DHS: electrical generation, natural gas production & distribution, transportation systems monitoring and control, and wastewater treatment. Basically, every critical infrastructure – the list included ten sectors - failed during the hurricane. What message does this send to potential terrorists about the security of our infrastructure? Think about it, a hurricane knocks offline part of the electric grid and two pipelines go down, causing gas prices to skyrocket to above 3 dollars a gallon. What kind of harm could a terrorist, wanting to hurt our critical infrastructure do if our infrastructure is so vulnerable?

“Now, I know that infrastructure is not fail-proof and that sometimes the best we can hope for is mitigation of potential damage or destruction. Even mitigation, though, requires action. And I’m not seeing this from DHS, despite the press releases and promises. For example, Department officials have said that regulatory changes are necessary for it to adequately protect chemical facilities. This summer, the Department testified that it would come back in a few weeks to give us details. I’m still waiting. Barbara Jordan once said that ‘What the people want is very simple. They want an America as good as its promise.’ It is about time that the federal government make good on its promise and fulfills the commitments made after 9/11.”

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